

LEARNERS' DIFFICULTIES AND PERCEIVED SOLUTIONS IN IELTS ACADEMIC WRITING ESSAYS: A STUDY OF LEARNERS' PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract: This qualitative study investigates learners' perspectives on difficulties in IELTS Academic Writing Task 2 and practical solutions. Data were collected from eight learners enrolled in a small-group IELTS preparation class through classroom observation, analysis of their essays, and semi-structured interviews. Findings indicate four main difficulty areas: (1) task understanding; (2) idea organization and outlining; (3) linguistic limitations, particularly restricted vocabulary and limited grammatical range and accuracy; and (4) psychological barriers, including anxiety and low confidence. Participants also highlighted several strategies they perceived as helpful in addressing these difficulties, including model essay analysis, structured feedback from teachers and peers, and prewriting discussions to develop essay outlines. Pedagogical implications emphasize the need for integrated instruction that simultaneously fosters language accuracy, higher-order discourse competence, and strategic test-taking skills, while also addressing psychological barriers. The study suggests curriculum and classroom practices that combine cognitive, linguistic, and affective support to improve Task 2 performance.

Keywords: IELTS Academic Writing Task 2; writing difficulties; learner perspectives; pedagogical solutions

QUAN ĐIỂM CỦA NGƯỜI HỌC VỀ NHỮNG KHÓ KHĂN VÀ GIẢI PHÁP KHI LÀM BÀI VIẾT IELTS HỌC THUẬT

Tóm tắt: Nghiên cứu định tính này khảo sát quan điểm của người học về những khó khăn khi viết bài luận IELTS và các giải pháp thực tiễn. Dữ liệu được thu thập từ tám người học tại một lớp luyện thi nhỏ, qua quan sát lớp học, phân tích bài viết và phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc. Kết quả cho thấy người học có bốn nhóm khó khăn chính: (1) hiểu yêu cầu của đề bài; (2) sắp xếp ý tưởng và lập dàn bài; (3) khó khăn về ngôn ngữ, đặc biệt những hạn chế về vốn từ vựng và ngữ pháp; và (4) những trở ngại tâm lý, gồm lo lắng và thiếu tự tin. Người học nêu các giải pháp họ cho là hữu ích trong việc giải quyết các khó khăn đã nêu, gồm phân tích bài mẫu, nhận xét từ giáo viên và bạn học, và thảo luận trước khi viết để hỗ trợ lập dàn bài. Các kiến nghị nhấn mạnh nhu cầu giảng dạy tích hợp nhằm đồng thời phát triển khả năng sử dụng ngôn ngữ chính xác, năng lực diễn ngôn, kỹ năng làm bài và hỗ trợ về mặt tâm lý. Các kiến nghị gồm những giải pháp về chương trình dạy học và những hoạt động trong lớp học kết hợp với các hỗ trợ về tư duy, ngôn ngữ và cảm xúc để cải thiện năng lực viết bài luận IELTS.

Từ khóa: Bài viết Task 2 IELTS học thuật; khó khăn; quan điểm người học; giải pháp

1. Introduction

The growing role of the IELTS test in Vietnam has become apparent because of its various functions across society. As a measure of English proficiency, it has served as a gatekeeper to different areas relating to education and employment. Researchers have increasingly highlighted the important role of IELTS in shaping access to educational and employment opportunities in Vietnam (Huynh, 2020; Nguyen, 2023). This popularity has been confirmed through different policies recognizing IELTS scores as one of the acceptable criteria for high school graduation and university admission (Le & Phan, 2026). More than 100 universities in Vietnam have now accepted IELTS scores as one of the criteria for admission (Trang Hà, 2023). Furthermore, the IELTS certificate is increasingly sought by students applying for scholarships or seeking admission to institutions abroad.

The popularity of the IELTS test in Vietnamese language education has made test preparation a significant goal for learners. Of the four IELTS components, writing is considered a particularly challenging skill to develop as IELTS candidates commonly obtain lower scores in writing than in listening, reading, and speaking (Arefsadr et al., 2022; Nguyen & Le, 2022). Therefore, learners are expected to experience many difficulties. Given these challenges, the present study focuses on IELTS Academic Writing Task 2 for the following three reasons. First, Writing Task 2 contributes twice as much as Writing Task 1 to the overall IELTS Writing score and therefore has a substantial influence on candidates' final Writing band score (British Council, 2024). Second, Task 2 is assessed through four criteria - Task Response, Coherence and Cohesion, Lexical Resource, and Grammatical Range and Accuracy - which capture both the content and organization of the response and the range and accuracy of its language use (British Council, 2024). Third, developing competence in Writing Task 2 may be relevant to learners' future academic study because the task requires them to develop and support a position in an extended, formal response. These abilities have some relevance to academic writing in English-medium higher-education contexts, although IELTS Task 2 does not represent the full range of genres and writing practices required at university (Uysal, 2010). For all the above-mentioned reasons, learners and teachers often pay substantial attention to preparation for IELTS Academic Writing Task 2 (British Council, 2024).

Because IELTS Academic Writing Task 2 is demanding, learners may encounter various challenges. Understanding learners' perspectives, therefore, plays a significant role in supporting the development of their writing ability. This study aims to answer the following questions:

- What are the difficulties learners perceive when they complete the IELTS Academic Writing Task 2?
- What solutions do learners perceive as helpful in addressing these difficulties?

2. Literature review

2.1 Learners' difficulties in writing a response to IELTS Academic Writing Task 2

IELTS Academic Writing Task 2 is considered a particularly challenging task as learners are required to integrate various skills to produce an academic essay within a strict time limit. Apart from language accuracy, research has pointed out difficulties learners face in task

understanding (Arefsadr et al., 2022; Pearson, 2019), idea organization, argument development, and style appropriacy (Damayanti et al., 2023; Nguyen & Le, 2022).

Learners may not produce an essay that matches the task requirements due to their misunderstanding of the question. They may not understand the rhetorical demands of the task, which may require them to present an opinion, discuss both views of an issue, explain problems and solutions, or identify causes and effects (Damayanti et al., 2023). Another challenge for learners is that they do not know how to follow the formal academic style in IELTS Academic Writing Task 2, despite their competence in linguistic accuracy (Nguyen & Le, 2022). Even when learners' sentences are grammatically correct, they may fail to satisfy the register requirement because they use informal vocabulary, contractions, informal phrasal verbs, or a conversational tone (Speechful, 2026).

Organizing ideas is another important aspect that learners usually cannot manage effectively due to the lack of time (Liu & Deng, 2019; Nguyen & Le, 2022). Logical organization of ideas is an essential skill that learners need to develop, because it is really challenging for them to write a coherent essay under such a strict time constraint (Iwashita et al., 2021; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022). Musiman and Fitriana (2024) conclude that "students experience greater difficulty in organizing ideas than in using grammatically accurate language," with structural errors being most frequent in body paragraphs (e.g., missing topic sentences, weak coherence) (p. 53).

Language-related difficulties have been widely reported as a common challenge for learners. Grammar inaccuracy is often reported alongside difficulties in expressing ideas in English due to limited vocabulary, which can result in inaccurate expression and lexical repetition (Iwashita et al., 2021; Maharani & Setyarini, 2019; Nguyen & Le, 2022; Nguyen et al., 2022). Challenges in language use can also be reflected in learners' use of cohesive devices, which greatly affects their ability to develop arguments (Jafary et al., 2023). According to Jafary et al., effective use of these devices helps establish clear relationships between ideas and paragraphs, which is reflected in IELTS scoring.

Another difficulty is idea generation (Gardiner & Howlett, 2016; Liu & Deng, 2019; Maharani & Setyarini, 2019; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022). EFL learners frequently experience problems generating relevant ideas and elaborating on them sufficiently to produce coherent argumentative essays (Uba & Souidi, 2020). Limited background knowledge (Alia et al., 2025; Rizkina & Adani, 2024; Wilson, 2010), unfamiliarity with the topic (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022; Nguyen et al., 2022), and lack of interest in the topic (Alia et al., 2025) are frequently reported as reasons for students' difficulties in idea generation. This pattern is consistent with cognitive perspectives suggesting that writing about unfamiliar content imposes high cognitive demands and impedes coherent idea production (Wexler, 2019).

Apart from the above-mentioned difficulties, other challenges receive less emphasis in the literature. These include lack of interest, anxiety and fatigue (Maharani & Setyarini, 2019; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022). Students in Maharani and Setyarini's (2019) study reported that post-school exhaustion occasionally demotivated them from engaging in IELTS study, while anxiety emerged when they attempted to use a foreign language they had not yet mastered and consequently were unable to meet their own performance expectations.

2.2 Effects of interventions on learners' writing improvement

In response to learners' challenges, researchers have evaluated the effectiveness of different solutions. One of the most popular ones is the use of model essays, which has been shown to have a positive effect on learners' performance in Writing Task 2 (Tieu & Baker, 2023). Nguyen and Le (2022) suggested that incorporating noticing activities (i.e. activities that help learners become aware of features in the input) into model-essay analysis can draw learners' attention to salient textual features and support the development of argumentation, paragraph organization, and task fulfilment.

Jafary et al. (2023) reported the benefits of model essays in terms of learners' improvement in coherence and cohesion, as well as their ability to fulfil a task. They contend that instructional exposure to model essays that foreground cohesive devices can facilitate learners' internalization of effective textual structures, while feedback that explicitly highlights cohesive markers has been shown to yield particularly strong gains in writing quality.

Another solution examined in the literature is genre-based instruction, which helps learners understand the linguistic and discourse conventions of academic essays. This includes learning how to organize arguments and produce coherent responses that meet the specific requirements of a given task. Damayanti et al. (2023) believe that explicit instruction of these features can help learners improve their writing by meeting the conventions of academic argumentation, i.e., making their position clear and knowing how to support an argument appropriately.

Feedback plays a significant role in learners' improvement, especially when learners understand and follow teachers' comments to revise their essays (Pearson, 2022). A combination of feedback and model essays can be of great benefit for learners (Jafary et al., 2023). Peer feedback is also beneficial for learners because it encourages active learning. It has been suggested in the literature that peer feedback gives learners opportunities to identify their own weaknesses in comparison with their peers' and revise their writing with greater awareness of the marking criteria (Al Noor, 2020; Ganji, 2009; Sun et al., 2023).

Prewriting discussion has been shown to be a promising solution (Arzhadeeva & Kudinova, 2020), as it provides learners with opportunities to generate arguments, support opinions, and organize ideas logically before writing.

The final intervention is explicit instruction of task requirements and planning frameworks (Brown, 1998). Learners may be confused by their misunderstanding of the requirements of a task, i.e., agreeing or disagreeing, discussing both views, or giving a problem-solution/cause-effect response. According to Antony (2023), explicit instruction of task expectations and planning frameworks (or templates) can make learners more confident and perform better. Frameworks are useful for learners as they provide them with a ready-made structure for organizing the essay.

2.3 Research gap

Most investigations into difficulties associated with the IELTS Academic Writing Task 2 have predominantly employed quantitative methodologies, typically evaluating single interventions (for example, classroom instruction or quasi-experimental procedures) and operationalizing outcomes as discrete variables such as lexical resource, coherence and cohesion,

grammatical accuracy, and task response. Such approaches seldom foreground learners' lived experiences or the subjective utility of proposed remedies, leaving contextually situated challenges and learners' self-reported, feasible pedagogical responses insufficiently explored. Moreover, studies that simultaneously integrate learners' perspectives, everyday classroom practices, and samples of actual IELTS Academic Writing Task 2 performance in a single design are scarce.

Responding to this gap, the present study brings together learners' perceptions, observed classroom practices, and their actual written products to generate a richer, more contextualized account of both problems and potential solutions in IELTS Writing Task 2. Rather than prioritizing large-scale sampling, it focuses on a small group of learners within their regular classroom context, exploring their self-reported difficulties and perceptions of the effectiveness of the instructional responses they receive. By foregrounding participants' voices and examining the phenomenon in its natural setting, the study aims to contribute a more nuanced, reality-based portrayal of learners' experiences, allowing them to articulate their challenges and helpful strategies in descriptive, experience-near terms rather than through externally imposed, prescriptive categories.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the meanings underlying learners' perceptions and their experiences. This research approach is appropriate for understanding a social phenomenon from the perspectives of the participants and for examining context-dependent data from interviews, observations and documents (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). A qualitative design is appropriate when the aim is to collect data from multiple sources to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

3.1 Research setting

The study was carried out in the context of an IELTS preparation class, which provided a favorable environment for observing classroom activities, collecting learners' essays, and conducting interviews with learners regarding the topic explored. This authentic environment is significant as it helps the researcher capture learners' behaviors, their interactions and meanings in their context (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

3.2 Participants and sampling

Purposeful sampling was applied to select participants for this study, which is common in qualitative studies to identify individuals who can provide relevant and rich information (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The participants included eight learners studying together in a small private class preparing for the IELTS examination. They reported an overall score of around 5.0; some had taken the real test, while others had previously taken a mock test. Among the eight participants, four were selected for interviews. Nearly all the participants were high school students. Only one participant held a job, and there was only one male participant. As the study followed a qualitative approach, the final number of participants interviewed was decided on the basis of information richness instead of statistical representativeness (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3.3 Data collection instruments

Data were collected from three sources, including classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and learners' essays. Observation was used to observe and record classroom interactions, behaviors, and contextual features that could serve as a supplementary source for interviews (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This also laid the foundation for the semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to express their views openly without straying from the research goals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Learners' essays were used to provide evidence of their performance and supplement the qualitative data by providing evidence related to their claims and observations.

3.4 Data collection procedure

There were three stages of data collection. First, classroom observations were conducted with detailed field notes recorded on learners' behavior, interaction, and performance related to the topic under investigation. Second, learners' essays were collected and reviewed to explore their authentic performance. These essays were written during their learning period and were assigned by their teacher either before or during the study period. Learners' essays and classroom observations were used to supplement the interview data and support data triangulation. These materials also informed the purposive selection of participants for subsequent semi-structured interviews. The identified participants were selected on a voluntary basis. Third, the semi-structured interviews were conducted in Vietnamese with the selected participants to further explore and understand their perceptions, behaviors, and performance more deeply. Because nearly all the selected interview participants did not feel comfortable being audio-recorded, one researcher asked questions, and the other took notes during the interviews. The interviews were conducted individually, with each interview lasting between 30 and 40 minutes, depending on the amount and richness of information provided by the participants.

3.5 Data analysis

The data were analyzed thematically. First, the observation notes, the interview notes and learners' essays were read repeatedly. This helped the researchers become familiar with the data. Then, the researchers identified meaningful units of data and coded them before grouping them into different categories. These categories were compared across data sources to identify recurring patterns and themes. Thematic analysis is widely used in qualitative research as it is useful for researchers to interpret patterns of meaning arising from different sources of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach can also facilitate the comparison of different data sources for consistency and interpretive strength (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

3.6 Trustworthiness

To enhance trustworthiness, triangulation, careful documentation of procedures, and systematic data coding were employed in the study. Data were examined across three data sources, namely observations, learners' essays, and interviews. Findings were examined across these sources to identify converging evidence, rather than depending on a single source of evidence (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Detailed field notes were kept to enhance transparency in the data analysis process (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

4. Findings and discussion

4.1 The difficulties perceived by learners in IELTS Academic Writing Task 2

The findings suggest that learners face a number of interrelated difficulties when completing IELTS Academic Writing Task 2. These can be grouped into four areas: understanding the task, organizing ideas and planning, vocabulary and grammatical structures, and psychological difficulties.

4.1.1 Understanding the task

Understanding the task is the first step learners should take before making any subsequent decisions. This involves understanding specific task requirements and the task topic. Difficulties in understanding specific task requirements were identified as an obstacle when a participant described difficulty distinguishing among the requirements of different IELTS Task 2 essay types. In the interview, she said, “I’m confused when I should give my opinion and when I should not.”

Several interviewees described difficulties in understanding the task topic due to their unfamiliarity with the topic or limited vocabulary. It has also been pointed out that a lack of knowledge about the topic is a significant problem for learners who have no idea how to write despite their wide vocabulary (Liu & Deng, 2019). Therefore, the need for learners to possess adequate background knowledge to cope with various topics should receive more emphasis (Wilson, 2010).

In other cases, the participants reported misunderstanding the difference between general and specific topics. As one participant noted, she misunderstood the question when she wrote a response to the question of whether traditional ideas from older generations are helpful in preparing younger generations for modern life. In the paragraph explaining the reasons why she did not think traditional ideas were useful, she wrote about young people’s lives in the modern world. This is her original paragraph:

Nowadays, young people are very active and creative in their way of thinking, they love adventure and also want to challenge themselves, follow their dreams. Open mindset also plays an important role in young generations as it helps them to know a lot of information around, the world through the Internet. Because of living in modern life, young people are affected strongly by technology and social media. This can help them keep up with the social trends, but it also makes them addicted to the Internet.

All of the above participants’ accounts resonate with prior research documenting IELTS candidates’ difficulties in accurately interpreting Task 2 prompts, a problem that frequently results in essays that drift off topic. Arefsaadr et al. (2022) similarly report that many learners struggle to comprehend task requirements, leading to partial or misaligned responses. This issue is echoed in Bagheri and Riasati’s (2016) study, which highlights learners’ tendency to produce writing that lacks focus or fails to address all aspects of the prompt adequately.

4.1.2 Organizing ideas and essay planning

Observations and learners’ essays suggest that a lack of planning before writing was quite common because of time constraints. When given the topic “Some universities now offer their courses on the Internet so that people can study online. Is this a positive or negative

development?”, only a few learners made a quick detailed plan; others simply jotted down a few bullet points or even just thought about their response and wrote it down. The following excerpt was taken from one of the participants’ essays discussing the positive aspects of online courses:

On the one hand, studying online has a lot of positive points for people who really want to study online. First of all, people can easily arrange their timetable in days. They can now study at home or at workplace without going to the classroom. Moreover, some courses can be very flexible about time for people who do not have time to study face to face. Those courses can help learners to study whenever they have free time by recording their teaching videos. In addition, people can also have more new online friends, who have the same studying hobby with us, through online courses.

In this paragraph, the first two supporting ideas (flexibility of time and flexibility of location) are mixed together. First, the participant discussed time, then location, before returning to time again. Later in the interview, the writer of the paragraph noted, “As I am anxious about the shortage of time, I tend to think fast and rush to write down my essay directly on the answer sheet without careful planning.”

Apart from the illogical arrangement of ideas within the paragraph, the participants also reported difficulties developing one idea successfully. One participant noted, “I often don’t know what to write after introducing an idea, so I abandon it and move on to the next one. As a result, my writing becomes more like a list than a naturally developing text.” Sometimes the supporting sentences diverged from the main idea of the paragraph rather than supporting it, leading to a weak paragraph structure. Participants admitted that due to their lack of careful planning, they often followed the flow of ideas during writing and therefore forgot the topic sentence. One participant expressed an idea shared by several others: “When I’m writing, I tend to follow what’s going out from my head, so I just add an idea, then another idea . . . without looking back at the topic sentence.”

Training in idea expansion and argument structuring should receive more attention, as these skills constitute to the overall essay structure, which is one of the most challenging aspects for learners (Farid & Saifuddin, 2018). A clear paragraph structure is also an important feature that is often omitted in favor of grammar and vocabulary. The lack of training in paragraph structure is one of the reasons for repetition and inconsistencies in learners’ development of supporting ideas (Liu & Deng, 2019).

4.1.3 Vocabulary and grammatical structures

A recurring theme in the interviews was limited vocabulary and grammatical knowledge. Participants commonly reported lacking appropriate vocabulary for a topic, which reduced the precision and sophistication of their writing. Some admitted that their lexical resources were mostly passive, so they could understand the vocabulary when they read, but they found it challenging to use it productively. This finding is consistent with the findings of various studies on Vietnamese learners (Hoang & Tran, 2026; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022) as well as with other studies which suggest that difficulties in using vocabulary appropriately are common not only among Vietnamese learners but also among other learners of English in general (Iwashita et al., 2021; Maharani & Setyarini, 2019).

The problem of grammatical structures, as revealed by the participants, was mainly at the sentence level. Analysis of their essays and the participants’ accounts showed that despite their

relevant ideas, insufficient command of sentence structures often interfered with their ability to express themselves clearly. The problem of limited vocabulary and grammatical structures is illustrated in the following paragraph in an essay about whether strict punishments for driving offences are essential to reduce traffic accidents:

On the other hand, some people do not agree with the strict punishments of the government because they believe that other measures are the key to improving road safety. They will warn when driver have wrong and not take their money, driver degree. Besides, they want to reducing the traffic accidents by increasing people awareness. For example, they can open the campaign to education.

The extract shows errors in subject–verb agreement, verb complementation, word formation, articles, countability, lexical choice, and spelling. The pattern suggests that the learner has partial control of basic English rules but has difficulty selecting the appropriate grammatical form within longer clauses. The most plausible overall explanation is that several factors interact: learners’ still-developing second-language grammar, overgeneralisation of English rules, limited knowledge of word combinations, possible influence from their first language, and inadequate monitoring while writing.

The findings relating to limited grammatical structures and vocabulary are consistent with previous studies showing that the impact of inadequate grammatical knowledge, especially at the sentence level, can be a major barrier to learners’ writing even when learners have relevant ideas (Hoang & Tran, 2026; Jafary et al., 2023; Truong & Bui, 2022).

4.1.4 Other academic writing-related difficulties

Other challenges described by the participants in the interviews were difficulties with editing and anxiety caused by time pressure and financial pressure as well. A common difficulty noted in the observations was that participants often found it difficult to identify mistakes in their editing sessions. In the interview data, some participants reported that they found it easier to identify mistakes in their peers’ writing than in their own. However, when they compared their proofreading with their teacher’s revisions, they realized that they had missed many errors in both their own and their peers’ writing.

A common difficulty shared by many participants was time pressure, which has been identified as a common factor influencing learners’ writing (Gardiner & Howlett, 2015; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022). Together with financial pressure, this contributed to participants’ anxiety. Several participants admitted they were under pressure to perform well in the test because otherwise they felt guilty about the large amount of money they had asked for from their parents. One participant revealed, “I felt stressed when I had to ask for such an amount of money from my parents who always work very hard to earn a living, and therefore, I was more anxious in my test; I couldn’t take it again.”

Taken together, the findings show that the difficulties reported by the participants were multidimensional and mutually reinforcing. The following section will highlight the solutions that the participants considered helpful.

4.2 Solutions learners reported as useful

A recurring theme in the interviews regarding perceived useful solutions was the use of model essays. In one observation session, participants were seen going through a guided analysis

of a model essay, which was the sample answer to the same task they had completed previously. This was conducted before a feedback session on their writing. All the participants interviewed considered this a productive activity. One participant noted, “having a chance to compare our answer with the model essay, we could learn much better than analyzing a certain sample essay we hadn’t written before”. They were asked questions to help them notice the essay structure, argument development, idea development, etc. They even learned different ways of expressing the same concept or idea, which they had struggled with during their writing of that essay. These findings reflect the value of model essay analysis found in many other studies, including Tieu and Baker (2022), Nguyen and Le (2022), and Jafary et al. (2023).

Another important finding is the value of feedback. In one feedback session, the participants were given two handouts: the first contained all the learners’ anonymous original essays, and the second contained the teacher’s track-changes corrective feedback. After analyzing the sample essay under the teacher’s guidance, the learners were asked to edit each of the essays on the first handout before comparing the teacher’s editing (on the second handout) with their own. Guided peer feedback was conducted in the group where learners contributed their comments based on the teacher’s questions. These activities were useful to them as they realized that they were learning by doing.

In response to questions about the teacher’s feedback, one participant remarked, “I’m glad I had a chance to ask my teacher to explain the mistakes I don’t quite understand so I won’t repeat them next time.” Participants demonstrated engagement during the observation session: they used the session to request explanations for the errors that had been corrected.

The importance of feedback in the development of learners’ writing proficiency has been highlighted in the existing literature (Al Noor, 2020; Ganji, 2009). In particular, feedback can support students in addressing not only higher-order concerns, such as the organization and coherence of ideas, the development of arguments, and the overall effectiveness of their written texts, but also surface-level problems, including grammatical, lexical, spelling, and punctuation errors. By drawing learners’ attention to these different dimensions of writing, feedback enables them to identify areas for improvement and make more informed revisions. Furthermore, feedback helps learners develop a clearer understanding of the criteria used to evaluate their writing, thereby increasing their awareness of the expectations associated with effective written communication.

Discussion before writing was put forward by the participants as a way to increase their confidence, because they could “crack” the task together and plan under the teacher’s guidance. “Collective generation of ideas was always better,” one participant explained, “especially with unfamiliar topics”. The participants appreciated planning with the teacher’s help. They also expressed their preference for a framework for paragraph structure and for each type of essay. During the preparation session before writing, it was observed that learners were asked to draft their topic sentences for the body paragraphs before beginning to write the introduction. This approach was really helpful, as one participant put it, “because I never forget the topic sentence anymore”.

Frameworks and explicit instruction in frameworks are a common solution. However, according to Antony (2023) and Brown (1998), teachers should be careful with the use of

frameworks to avoid learners' overreliance on templates, which may limit their ability to express themselves. Therefore, the teaching of frameworks should be combined with guided analysis and regular practice.

As noted above, the difficulties encountered by learners are interrelated; therefore, no single solution is sufficient to address learners' challenges in IELTS Academic essay writing. There should be an integrated approach to intervention in order to support learners, especially those who need structured support and have limited exposure to academic writing.

5. Conclusion

This study investigated the difficulties learners encounter when completing IELTS Academic Writing Task 2 and identified pedagogical solutions that learners perceived as useful. Analysis of learners' essays, interview responses, and class observations revealed different challenges, including understanding task topics and requirements, essay planning and organizing ideas, using language accurately, editing, and managing time and anxiety. From the learners' perspectives, useful solutions included guided analysis of model essays, guided peer feedback and teacher feedback, and prewriting discussion. The study's findings corroborate previous research in the field and offer insights into learners' difficulties as well as the self-reported strategies they found useful.

Effective preparation for IELTS Academic Writing Task 2 should involve an integrated approach that simultaneously develops learners' language accuracy, higher-order discourse competence, and strategic test-taking skills. Contextualized practice that develops both sentence-level competence and essay-level performance should be taken into consideration when designing learning activities. Equally importantly, learners' non-linguistic challenges should not be ignored, as these may also affect learners' performance.

Limitations of the study include a small sample of learners, the lack of teachers' perspectives, and the absence of audio-recorded interview data because the participants (mostly high school students) were not comfortable being recorded. However, to partly address this limitation, the interviews were conducted by both researchers, with one responsible for taking notes.

Future research should involve a larger and more diverse sample of participants, including teachers to provide complementary perspectives. Audio-recording interviews with participants' consent should be prioritized to facilitate more in-depth analysis.

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